

Movin' On

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> <meta name="Generator"> "I'll be damned

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MOVIN' ON

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"I'll be damned!" A muffled shout came from beneath the TransRover, followed by several muttered curses.

"John!" Devon admonished the mechanic with a quick glance towards the kids. Fortunately they were out of earshot, in the middle of a history lesson with Yale. "What's wrong? Can't you fix it?"

"Nothing's wrong!" Danziger grumbled, while he crawled out from underneath the large vehicle, dusting off his pants. "And when there's nothing wrong, I can't very well fix it, can I?"

Eden Advance had abandoned their daily hike early today. The crewmembers were busy setting up camp beneath a small grove of trees, amidst endless gently rolling hills that were covered with knee-high grass. The sun was still high overhead, making the air shimmer in the distance. To the south of the camp, several miles away, huge mountains pointed their ragged, snow-capped peaks toward the blue expanse.

In the past few hours all three vehicles had developed an inexplicable tendency to veer off their course, and to those mountains. Keeping them on track, in the westerly direction the group was headed, required a continuous vigilance from their drivers and Devon had called a halt so Danziger could fix whatever was wrong with their vehicles.

"What do you mean, nothing's wrong?" Devon asked incredulously. "The Rover has been veering to the south every time Cameron let his attention wander. And it's the same with the ATV and the Rail."

"I *know* the problem," Danziger snapped while he wiped his hands on a rag. "But I tell you, there's nothing wrong with these vehicles. Maybe it's the drivers?"

Before Devon could reply, Yale walked up to the pair. "I think I know what it is, Devon," he said. They both turned towards the tutor who looked quite serious. Devon raised her eyebrows in question.

"I'm picking up a strong magnetic pull from those mountains," Yale said, motioning towards the forbidding peaks in the south. "I think that's why the vehicles keep turning in that direction. Like the needle in a compass always turns north."

"So, what can we do about it?" Devon asked the two men.

"If that's the cause, nothing much," Danziger admitted. "Keep fighting it, forcing the vehicles to stay on course, the way we have been doing. Until we move out of range of the pull."

Devon sighed. It wasn't really a major setback, they'd seen worse, but it did mean they'd have to spell drivers a lot more often - and that meant they wouldn't make as good time as she had hoped crossing the plains.

Alonzo was whistling a merry tune while he steered the DuneRail south, to the mountain range. He always enjoyed these little expeditions, exploring the planet. And those mountains interested him. Having Julia along made him even happier.

The night before, around the campfire, the group had discussed the strange phenomenon, this strong magnetism radiating from the mountain range to their south.

"I think we should check it out. Maybe it's some kind of metal ore or something," Morgan said, his eyes gleaming in anticipation.

"Morgan!" Bess nudged him gently, in warning.

"I know, I know," he said, throwing up his hands in a gesture of resignation. "We can't mine it without the Terrians' consent. But still --"

"Morgan is right," Julia interrupted. "We should go and check it out. We need to find out as much about this planet as we can." She looked around, scanning people's faces, to finally rest on Devon's.

"Hmm, I don't know," Devon replied, frowning briefly. "It'll take us a day or two and we're running behind schedule as it is."

"I'm with Julia," Alonzo put in. "We should learn anything we can about this place." He gazed at the distant mountains, visible as dark shadows against the star-lit night sky.

"And I could use the time to fix the hydro-compressor properly," Danziger added. "You know these make-shift welds never hold long." Devon hesitated another moment. When the other group members also nodded that they thought a scout was in order, she relented.

And now Alonzo was behind the wheel of the Rail. Julia sat next to him, keeping an eye on the scanner in her hand, so they'd go directly towards the source of the pull. Alonzo didn't think it was necessary, he could feel the vehicle point itself in the right direction. All he had to do was make sure they followed the smoothest route, evading the worst of the bumps in the terrain.

Walman and Morgan were sitting in the back. Morgan was excitedly babbling about finding new mineral sources. He had learned the hard way about mining this planet, but was still thrilled by the prospect of discovering some of the planet's riches.

"There!" Julia pointed when they reached the foot of the mountains. Above them, a little higher up the slope of the nearby mountain, a dark hole showed. "The pull is coming from that cave."

"I know," Alonzo said quietly. He could sense a soft pulsating in the air, singing in his blood. It was a comforting feeling, familiar and pleasant. They got out of the Rail, clambering up the mountainside.

Inside it was gloomy, the sunlight only illuminating the first few feet into the cave. They heard the regular drip of water somewhere in the distance. Off to their left the cave narrowed into a low tunnel. Walman peered into the darkness.

"Hey," he called, "there's a dim glow down there. Something's in there."

In single file they entered the tunnel. In several places, the ceiling was so low they had to crawl on their hands and knees to continue. Walman crawled ahead, his Luma light showing the way. Alonzo followed him closely, carrying the Mag Pro, his finger on the firing button. Julia's hand-held scanner didn't show any life signs in the tunnel, but they'd learned to take nothing for granted on this planet.

Walman halted and gasped, his quick intake of breath full of surprise. He stopped so abruptly that Alonzo nearly bumped into him. The pilot nudged him aside to take a peek and his mouth dropped open.

"Wow," was all he could muster.

"What? What is it?" Morgan demanded and pushed past the two men. The tunnel opened into a huge cavern. Alonzo craned his neck to see the ceiling but it receded in the darkness. The cavern seemed to go up

all the way to the mountain summit. In the middle of the room stood a large tube-like cylinder, glowing softly, a milky orange light pulsating inside.

"What the heck's that?" Morgan asked when he regained his composure, slowly getting to his feet. Julia walked cautiously toward the cylinder, quickly moving the scanner across its surface.

"It looks like a part of a push-pull propulsion system," Alonzo said, "except way oversized."

Julia nodded. "The scanner shows a strong current running inside. It's moving back and forth along some kind of crystals; it creates the orange light."

The men followed Julia, moving deeper into the cavern, slowly circling the opaque tube. As they closed in, they could all feel the pulse dragging at them.

"Who do you think made that?" Morgan asked, awed by the sheer size of the thing.

"I don't know," Julia replied. "Whoever it was, they were technologically very advanced."

"Hey, over here," Alonzo's excited voice reached them from the far corner of the immense cavern. He motioned towards the wall, a smooth, unmarred expanse of dully gleaming rock. As the others came closer they discovered what excited him so. Built into the wall an immense control panel was visible. Huge dials, their needles motionless, glowed softly in the orange light. Levers and buttons of various sizes and shapes jutted out from the otherwise unbroken surface.

"This is a space ship's control panel," Alonzo said, spellbound. "I wonder how it got here? Where the ship is?" His voice was filled with longing to sit behind the controls and soar through space again. Julia caught his eye and he smiled wanly, shrugging almost invisibly.

"Look at this," Walman exclaimed. He had climbed onto a low ledge near Alonzo's left and was studying the wall closely. "There's writing on it," he said. "Nothing I can understand though."

Alonzo peered close at the inscriptions Walman pointed out.

"It's a star chart," he said at last. "But not a constellation I recognize."

The four humans stared at each other wide-eyed. What on earth had they discovered this time?

"It seems," Julia said gingerly, "that we are not the first aliens to visit this planetâ€|" her voice trailed off as the implications of what she just said slowly sank in.

"Maybe Yale can find the chart in his databases?" Morgan suggested.

"Good idea," Julia concurred and made to call the tutor over Gear. In

the meantime, Alonzo continued to study the controls. He slowly trailed his fingers across the surface, from one dial to another, obviously wishing to use the instruments and fly again.

"I wonder what this button's for?" Alonzo mused, caressing a large red button, the size of a small dish. A small plaque below the button was inscribed with the scrawly hieroglyphs that also appeared on the star chart.

"Maybe Yale knows?" Julia said, extending her VR eyepiece outward and bending over to provide Yale with a closer view of the glyphs. "Can you translate that, Yale?" she asked.

"Hold on," Yale answered. "I'm scanning my databases right now." A long silence followed while they waited for the tutor to come up with an answer. Alonzo got restless, fidgeting. He strongly desired to just *press* the button.

"Oh hell," he finally said. "There's a quicker way to find out than wait for Yale." And he pushed the button. As he did so, Yale shouted, "Don't! It's a start-button!" so loudly Alonzo could hear him squeaking through Julia's Gear. She ripped it off her head, rubbing her ear, and turned towards Alonzo to lecture him about looking before you leap. Before she could get a word out, the cylinder behind them came to life. It began to hum loudly, the orange glow brightening. Then the earth shook. Julia was thrown against Alonzo by the violence of the sudden upheaval and they crashed to the floor together.

Again the earth shook, showering them with debris that loosened from the high ceiling and cave walls.

"We gotta get out of here," Alonzo panted, scrambling to his feet and pulling Julia up. "Go, go, go!" He propelled her towards the narrow tunnel. Ahead of them Walman and Morgan reached the exit and disappeared into the dark tunnel. Julia hurried after them, stumbling and crashing into the wall when another strong ripple moved through the earth. With a last wistful look at the controls, Alonzo followed her.

They staggered out of the cave, almost running down the mountainside, nearly sliding down but somehow managing to keep to their feet. At the base of the mountain, Walman and Morgan were waiting. The two men both looked pale and Walman had a deep gash on his forehead where a falling stone fragment hit him.

Beneath them the earth continued to shake and ripple. Large cracks appeared, the earth being pushed upward in places while deep chasms gaped in others.

"What is happening?" Morgan squealed, frightened out of his wits and grabbing onto Walman for support.

"Earthquake," Julia replied curtly. She looked up the mountainside. Large rocks were tumbling downward, followed by a shower of smaller stones. And as she looked the cave opening disappeared behind a cluster of falling rocks.

"We've got to get away from here," she urged the men. "Before the whole mountain comes down on us." A quick glance at the Rail told

them they'd have to walk. A large boulder had crushed the vehicle to a pile of twisted metal.

They began running, tripping over their own feet as the rocky surface continued to move. At last the ground settled, only the occasional quiver still traveling through the earth. The humans stopped to gaze back at the mountain. Its outline had changed dramatically; the top had disappeared. Instead of a snow-capped peak, the end of the tube they'd found in the cavern showed, glowing red hot, streaks of light spouting out of it. They stood gaping, wondering what had happened when Walman suddenly asked, "What's wrong with the sun? It's moving so fast."

They followed his gaze towards the bright orb. It was moving across the sky in ever-increasing speed. And as they watched, it disappeared below the horizon, plunging the planet's surface in darkness.

"It's not the sun that's moving," Julia whispered. "The planet isâ€|"

A year later, aboard Colony.

"G889 should be coming up right about now," Sheila, the ship's pilot, told her navigator. They were in the cockpit of the large Colony ship, finally reaching their destination after twenty-four years of cold sleep. The navigator peered out of the front window, his nose nearly pressed flat against the glass.

"Sorry," he said. "There's nothing. Just the two moons."

As Sheila leaned towards the window to take a look herself, she realized that he was right. Where the planet called G889 was supposed to be, nothing showed but another spot of empty space. And only the two moons were left to chase each other around the emptinessâ€|

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Comments to HellersWebDoc@yahoo.com

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